

## Dale Farm Travellers eviction: the battle of Basildon

Local councils say they can no longer afford to provide sites for Travellers – evictions are about to begin

By [Patrick Barkham](#)



Travellers site in Essex. Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/REUTERS

25/03/2011 - As the rain fills the potholes in the rough track outside, Mary McCarthy's home beneath a towering vase of burgundy and cream artificial roses and gestures immaculate living room. "This might look like a house to you but it's a chalet down into two pieces and moved."

Broken down and moved is the fate that awaits McCarthy and 86 Traveller families who have made a secluded field in the Essex countryside their home for the past decade. Basildon council voted to devote up to £8m, one third of its annual budget, to [families of Dale Farm](#) and destroy the community they have created in an area of green belt land.

The battle over Dale Farm, one of the largest unauthorised Traveller sites in the country, is how Gypsies and Travellers are being pummelled by a perfect storm. The Channel 4 documentary [My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding](#) confirmed popular prejudices that Gypsies are wealthy, vulgar freeloaders and spawned a rash of "My big fat Gypsy ..." headlines. Now, as public sector cuts are hitting Traveller education services while squeezed budgets mean authorities are even less willing to provide sites for Gypsies. Temporary planning permissions issued to many Travellers five years ago by councils desperate to make controversial sites disappear, are expiring. This year, temporary permissions for 50 Gypsy families out in South Cambridgeshire alone – leaving Travellers mired in an expensive and insecure planning tangle. And now, most alarmingly of all for Travellers, comes the clamour of supportive comments from [David Cameron](#) and [Eric Pickles](#), Conservative [local government](#) secretary – who is fast turning his personal opposition to unauthorised Traveller sites into government policy.

When McCarthy and her relatives pulled up at Dale Farm 10 years ago it appeared to be a solution to the problem of life on the road. McCarthy, a great-grandmother, had left a scrap yard from her travelling days because it was a rare place where they could get water. Adjacent to the busy dual carriageway around Basildon, with pylons and two catteries for neighbours, the scrap yard was far from idyllic. That suited them until a large Gypsy site next door where residents had obtained planning permission in the 1970s, they believed they would be left alone. They were wrong. After 10 years of planning applications and the opposition of neighbours and Conservative-run Basildon council, the 400 residents of Dale Farm are now a 28-day eviction notice away from being thrown off their land.

Unlike many neat Travellers' sites, Dale Farm is currently a sorry sight. Some derelict and strewn with rubbish, corrugated iron fences are collapsing and a few houses are littered with bottles and toys. The eviction threat is "absolutely dreadful" says McCarthy, who says they would clear up the mess if they were not losing their homes. "It's a beauty spot and we bought and paid for the land. It was a scrap yard. It wasn't like squatting. We bought and paid for the land. It was a scrap yard. It wasn't like a beauty spot and Travellers ruined it." McCarthy insists that eviction will make

"It's not that we're saying we won't go – where will we go to?" she says. "We've got to other people's land, carparks and laybys, but travelling life is finished now away with that. We can't do that any more."

The laws and attitudes of modern society make no space for nomadic life. They are forced to accept an uneasy compromise: a plot, or pitch, of their own, so they can send their children to school, but caravans and chalets rather than bricks and mortar, so they can have extended families and travel in the holidays. For all the tabloid furore over unauthorised Gypsy sites, there are 14,510 caravans on council and private sites with planning permission in England and just 3,636 caravans without; these unauthorised sites could fit accommodated on as little as one square mile of land.

This modest need has not been met in the past decade, however, because councils are reluctant to identify suitable plots of land for Gypsies. The eviction of Dale Farm is an exception. Basildon council has successfully removed travellers from another site. Traveller families were last week told by South Cambridgeshire district council that they must leave their home in Smithy Fen, Cottenham. "We're not wanted anywhere. We're not wanted in the countryside. We're not wanted in the town," says Candy Sheridan, a Liberal Democrat councillor and traveller who helps others through the labyrinthine planning system. "Again, she finds applications for sites rejected on grounds of 'visual impact'. 'Visual impact' means is that councillors don't want to see us. We are part of the community and we have been for 600 years. We have more right to be there than they do."

Under Labour, councils were obliged to provide a certain number of sites for travellers alongside regular housing in their development plans. Basildon was supposed to provide 100 pitches in addition to the 100 authorised (mostly privately owned) pitches it already had. But the coalition has signalled it will scrap these regional targets, so councils are free to do what they like. Basildon council says instead it will provide three new pitches each year to meet demand. South Cambridgeshire district council has no plan to provide or apply for any new pitches at all, despite having more caravans than any other local authority in the country. Candy Sheridan, who is full of good sense and pragmatic solutions, is actually sympathetic to local councillors; the objections, ultimately, lie with the settled community – who are afraid to support if they back Travellers. A Gypsy site "is on a par with an asylum or a wind turbine", in terms of popularity with the propertied classes, says Candy Sheridan.

Joseph G Jones of the Gypsy Council puts it more bluntly: "It's racially unacceptable for anybody to live next to a Gypsy site. There is nobody speaking honestly who wouldn't admit that? No one wants to live next to a Gypsy site next to their house. They fear their house price might go down and they have an irrational fear of Gypsies and Travellers and a fear of crime, which they think comes from a site in the area. It's very simple."

Tony Ball, the leader of Basildon council, has spent much of his career tackling Dale Farm conflict. How is an £8m eviction (Basildon's emergency fund will cover the cost) – a two-week stand-off with bailiffs; the Essex policing bill is estimated at an additional £1.5m – worth the use of taxpayers' money? "Look at the alternatives. If a council turns a blind eye to what moral right do we have to enforce against anybody else who breaks the law?" He insists the dispute is simply about unauthorised construction on green belt land. "A bedroom house is being demolished nearby. 'Green belt is there for a reason' is the argument against urban sprawl."

Tony Ball points out that Dale Farm residents own four unoccupied but legal pitches in Cottenham, Cambridgeshire, "but they say they prefer to remain where they are. People prefer to live in Mayfair if I could afford it," he says. Four pitches would only affect the Dale Farm residents and such comments make the council's opposition look like a vendetta. Is it? "Not at all. You or I wouldn't be able to build on green belt without permission," he says. "We are communicating with the Gypsy Council, these talks go on up until the day – if it has to happen – of us carrying out the forced evictions. I very much hope not to spend the money, but after 10 years the law will prevail when you have to say enough is enough and the law has to be upheld."



Traveller Mary McCarthy has lived at Dale Farm for 10 years. Photograph: Si Greene for the Guardian

Most constituents seem to support Ball's view. People wonder why Gypsies "rule" – and why they can't just live in a house. David Cameron knew he was large number of the static community when he talked of Dale Farm and "the unfairness that one law applies to everybody else and, on too many occasions, applies to Travellers". Basildon council is obliged by law to provide for the homeless offered Dale Farm residents flats and houses. "There is no need for the elderly or the young to live by the roadside because we have offered them a roof over where they can continue their education and healthcare," says Ball.

Around half the Gypsy community now lives in houses, but for many, like McCarthy, life behind bricks and mortar would be torture. A house can be both claustrophobic when you have grown up in a caravan. Dale Farm may look tatty but there is a sense of community here. Women pop into each other's caravans, chatting and borrowing things. Men arrive home from work together in their vans; teenagers mooch messages to their aunties.

"I have a lot of friends in the settled community. They say: 'It's lovely the way we come in and out and talk to one another, I don't even know my neighbours.' And you live next to one another because we get a lot of stick," says McCarthy. One of her friends prefers to remain anonymous, chips in: "You know the children are safe if they're here. The community protects the old as well. "Old people dependent on their young would suddenly be isolated in a distant council flat," explains Grattan Puxon, who also lives near Dale Farm. "They wouldn't survive it."

Sheridan is convinced there are practical solutions for hard-pressed councils. They want to live on council-run sites; they want to run their own and, if supported by loans, can do so through [Community Land Trusts](#); the first has been established by the (Conservative) [Mendip district council](#) in Somerset. Even more alluring is the prospect of central government money to help councils fund sites. Sheridan's local council has already dipped into this fund to create two "transit camps" where Travellers are not allowed to stay for more than three months – without spending any local taxpayers' money. Asked about this, according to Sheridan, many councils do not even know about this £60m. Of course, Ball says Basildon has not used this fund to find alternatives to Dale Farm because it does not have that land available to accommodate that amount of people within the town boundaries.

Sheridan still believes Basildon can save money, save council jobs and stop the evictions – and she is helping Dale Farm residents make **three** new applications to Basildon to provide alternative pitches. Ball cannot comment on the possibility of specific applications, but he is clear about one thing: Basildon cannot provide for all of Dale Farm. In an ideal world, would the Dale Farm Travellers move away from Basildon? "Absolutely," he says.

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While a few Lib Dems, notably [Lord Avebury](#), are lobbying vigorously for G coalition, Travellers have noticed a chill wind of change in government. "With making the comments he made last week about Dale Farm, it is open season Jones. "The coalition has just turned its back on the community." As MP for door to Basildon – Eric Pickles has taken a strong personal stance against un Traveller sites. Now his much-vaunted [localism bill](#) will free councils from t to provide a certain number of sites and outlaw retrospective planning perm: been virtually the only way Travellers have managed to get sites approved. "I of heart for us. They were willing to try and help us but this government . . ." off. "If they could get a toxic spray to do away with us they would."

Ball says his appeals to Westminster for help have been ignored by both Labour coalition. "The government may change but civil servants don't," he says. "I am with the failure to recognise that this is a national issue and not just a Basildon issue."

According to Thomas Acton, professor of Romani studies at the [University of East Anglia](#), Labour was far from perfect and only really began addressing housing and exclusion of Travellers after 2003. "You provide sites, you get on with the slow, stubborn community relations and then the problem goes away," says Acton. "Once you've got sites working well, nobody notices them." He believes the eviction at Dale Farm was resisted. "If the Basildon eviction goes smoothly and Eric Pickles is emboldened to evict Travellers out of their homes we could see things getting much worse," says Acton. "It's why the battle of Basildon has to be fought to the last moment and the eviction has to be as expensive as possible. If Basildon rolls over, the Tories will come back to tell us where Travellers have been living legally for years."

Protesters – "anarchists," says Ball – are likely to join residents in resisting the Basildon eviction. "It's obvious that people are going to go out and fight for their homes. They're going to say 'hello, how are you?' and let their homes be taken away," says Mervyn Jones. He vows that protests will be non-violent. Other Dale Farm Travellers, with the exception of Ball, are less placatory. "We've been putting our arguments in court and it hasn't done us any good," says one. "Come back when the bailiffs are here. It's a good story then. You'll see them leaving on fire."

Link: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/mar/25/dale-farm-travellers-eviction-basildon>

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